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DIA WASHINGTON DC
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
SECDEF WASHDC
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UNCLAS COLOMBO 000413

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA (BOUCHER), SCA/INS AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA, DCHA/FFP (DWORKEN, KSHEIN)
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA (MORRISP, ACONVERY, RTHAYER, RKERR)
ATHENS FOR PCARTER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA AND POL (SBERRY)
GENEVA FOR RMA (NKYLOH, NHILGERT, MPITOTTI)
USUN NEW YORK FOR ECOSOC (D MERCADO)
SECDEF FOR OSD - POLICY
PACOM ALSO FOR J-5

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Colombo 321

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The government of Sri Lanka announced a 48-hour period of restraint, during which the armed forces would confine themselves to defensive operations. International observers noted that shelling of the "safe zone" had diminished on April 11 and 12, and that no firing was now being reported from the area. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon welcomed the government's move, noting it was less than the pause of several days he had called for. He reiterated his appeal to the LTTE to allow civilians freedom of movement and to the government to adhere to its commitments not to use heavy weapons. Previously, Ambassador had undertaken numerous contacts with the Foreign Minister, Foreign Secretary and Senior Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa to urge them to declare a longer humanitarian pause and consider the idea of a UN Special Envoy to negotiate the release of the civilians trapped in the "safe zone." The ICRC plans to evacuate approximately 600 wounded civilians from the safe zone on April 13 and 14. Basil Rajapaksa said that the hold-fire period could be extended, particularly if the LTTE begins to release civilians. According to the UN and GSL sources, the earliest a ship can depart for the safe zone with badly needed food and medical supplies is April 16. End summary.

GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCES 48 HOUR PERIOD OF RESTRAINT

12. (U) On April 12, President Rajapaksa announced a 48-hour period of restraint in which the Sri Lankan armed forces would confine themselves to defensive operations: "The President is deeply conscious of the need to give the civilian population entrapped as

hostages by the ruthless actions of the LTTE the opportunity... to have uninhibited freedom of movement from the No Fire Zone to the cleared areas. With this objective in view, His Excellency has directed the Armed Forces of the State to restrict their operations during the New Year to those of a defensive nature... It is timely for the LTTE to acknowledge its military defeat and lay down its weapons and surrender. The LTTE must also renounce terrorism and violence permanently."

¶3. (U) In a statement issued on April 12 in New York, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon welcomed the Sri Lanka government's decision, noting, "This is less than the full humanitarian pause of several days I had pressed for but is nevertheless a useful first step and an opportunity to move towards the peaceful and orderly end to the fighting now so badly needed... The United Nations will, therefore, do whatever it can to support this humanitarian pause and help end the grave predicament of civilians in the conflict zone, including through the provision of more aid to those still trapped in the zone." The Secretary General said that during the period of the pause civilians wishing to leave the conflict zone should be allowed to do so and should then be treated fully in accordance with international standards and principles: "In particular, the LTTE must allow civilians to choose whether they stay or leave. This is a terrible conflict that must be ended as soon as possible. In the meantime, with tens of thousands of lives at risk on the beaches of northern Sri Lanka, I call on the government forces to adhere scrupulously to the commitments of the

government about non-use of heavy weapons. I also count on key members of the international community to support this pause and to continue to do all they can to avert further death and suffering in Sri Lanka."

¶4. (SBU) Head of the ICRC Colombo office Paul Castella told Ambassador on April 13 that ICRC staff in the safe zone reported that no firing of any kind had taken place since the government-announced pause began at midnight. Previously, on April 12, firing had diminished in intensity, without artillery, but mortars and automatic weapons were used. ICRC sources reported 62 wounded, of whom 16 were children. Three of the wounded later died in the hospital. Not including those wounded on April 12, 533 wounded were waiting to be evacuated. The ICRC plans to get half of these out on April 13 and the other half on April 14. The improved weather situation should help. The ICRC told us that the Ministry of Health had approved an ICRC medical shipment to go with the vessel for the wounded but that the military had yet to clear the delivery.

FOOD SHIP ON APRIL 16?

¶5. (SBU) UN Resident Coordinator Neil Buhne told Ambassador on April 13 that according to Basil Rajapaksa, the earliest a ship could sail with WFP food supplies would be April 16. This would be after the government-declared pause expires. Significantly, Buhne reported that Rajapaksa said it could be extended "if the LTTE behaves." Basil also confirmed that badly needed medicine would be on board. Buhne also said that UN staff in the safe zone report it had become much quieter in the safe zone. A few RPG rounds may have caused a few casualties, but nothing on the scale of the previous several days. Finally, he noted that it appeared the LTTE was trying to move civilians into the southern part of the safe zone in anticipation of GSL military operations in the northern part. 25-30,000 civilians are reluctant to move from their current locations, he said. If the LTTE permits them to stay, it is possible they might be able to escape to government-controlled territory.

FOREIGN SECRETARY CONTINUES TO QUESTION SHELLING

¶6. (SBU) Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona reported to Ambassador on April 13 that during his recent visit to Washington he was shown three satellite photos of the no fire zone, indicating houses with roofs blown off and water-filled circular craters. Kohona questioned whether the houses could have been damaged during the 1996 military campaign when the Mullaitivu camp was attacked by the LTTE. He said he had received assurances that no artillery had been directed to the no-fire zone. Ambassador noted that credible medical sources reported large numbers of wounded with shrapnel injuries sustained around April 8-9. Ambassador told Kohona that

had these been caused by the LTTE, there would likely have been an insurrection in the no-fire zone, given our knowledge of existing tensions stemming from the LTTE shootings of IDPs trying to escape.

MEETING WITH FOREIGN MINISTER ON SHELLING,
HUMANITARIAN PAUSE AND SPECIAL ENVOY IDEA

¶7. (SBU) Ambassador met Foreign Minister Bogollagama on April 11 to discuss U.S. concerns about shelling of the civilian safe zone, and the ideas of a humanitarian pause and of a UN Special Envoy. Ambassador noted he and others had held many bilateral meetings with senior Sri Lankan officials, including Army Commander Fonseka, Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, and Foreign Secretary Kohona, all of whom had denied that Sri Lankan forces were shelling the safe zone. Ambassador stated that these denials were not credible. The ICRC had reported 600 wounded waiting to be evacuated, all of whom had been wounded April 8 and 9. The injuries were from shrapnel, not bullet wounds. The Foreign Minister said he would attend a Sri Lankan National Security Council meeting later on April 11 which would discuss a 4-day humanitarian pause to begin on Monday, April 13. He asked what should be done during the pause. Ambassador urged that the GSL work with the UN to move up the next planned food shipment into that window, and highlighted that medicines and surgical supplies of all kinds had to be included, given critical shortages.

¶8. (SBU) Ambassador expressed hope that the GSL would not state publicly that the pause would be an opportunity for civilians to leave, only to announce at the end of that period, it was time for the military to act. Ambassador pointed out that it was common knowledge the Tamil Tigers won't let the civilians go. A better alternative, he said, would be for the GSL to allow a UN envoy to go in to the safe zone during the pause to talk directly to LTTE supremo Prabhakaran about terms for letting the civilians go and surrender of those LTTE cadres still in the safe zone.

¶9. (SBU) Bogollagama countered that the GSL was worried that the LTTE would seek to generate public relations capital from a visit, or try to string out the discussions. Ambassador explained that the UN and others could make clear publicly what the parameters of the visit were. Ambassador said the UN would have to be clear that the urgency of getting civilians out of harm's way would not permit lengthy negotiations. He observed the alternative of sending the army into the safe zone would be disastrous for Sri Lanka. The GSL's own Unmanned Aerial Vehicle footage confirmed the LTTE is building a berm, bunkers and trenches in anticipation of an attack. The bunkers will shelter cadres so it is the civilians who will be killed, Ambassador noted. The LTTE would like nothing more than to see 10,000 or more civilians killed which would give them a new 1983-style massacre around which they could rejuvenate the LTTE after its military defeat. Large civilian casualties would also have serious longer-term consequences for the GSL. Ambassador sought Bogollagama's personal intervention in raising these issues in the National Security Council meeting.

¶10. (SBU) UN Resident Coordinator Neil Buhne saw Bogollagama soon afterwards to share with him UN satellite imagery showing recent shelling craters.

¶11. (SBU) The Foreign Minister called on April 12 to brief Ambassador on the outcome of the Sri Lankan Security Council meeting. He previewed the President's announcement of a 48-hour "restraint of military operations to defensive nature" to begin at midnight. He said the military had opposed any pause, so as not to give the LTTE time to re-group. The Security Council had settled on

a two-day period of restraint, which he thought was positive. Bogollagama also said the GSL would work to find a ship so that relief supplies could go in during the 48 hour hold-fire period. The Minister reported that he had raised idea of a UN envoy, but there was no confidence within the Security Council that an envoy could do anything.

¶12. (SBU) Ambassador observed that the President had backtracked on his conversation with UN SG Ban Ki-Moon in which he had held out the prospect of a 4-day "humanitarian pause" previously discussed.

Ambassador noted that holding fire is something the GSL should be doing anyway in their own self-declared safe zone. Further, the GSL announcement appeared to leave little or no room for diplomacy. Ambassador asked whether the Minister had shared the Norwegian information that some LTTE leaders favor talks to work out a surrender. Bogollagama responded that he had, but Norway has lost credibility. Ambassador told the Foreign Minister that he was forced to conclude that the Government had decided the military will go into the safe zone and settle this, which would be disastrous both for the trapped civilians and the GSL. He asserted that Sri Lanka was missing a big opportunity to negotiate an LTTE surrender and save many lives. Bogollagama hesitated, then said, "let's wait to see how the 48-hour period goes."

¶13. (SBU) Ambassador subsequently spoke to the President's brother and senior advisor, Basil Rajapaksa and sought to convince him of the need for time to persuade the LTTE to surrender peacefully. Rajapaksa responded that so far the UN had not broached the idea of a Special Envoy. Further, he asked how we could know that the LTTE wouldn't take the envoy hostage? Or that Prabhakaran would agree to meet? He said the GSL would need firm commitments on these issues before agreeing to a Special Envoy. Ambassador responded that those conditions were all manageable, but that the main thing was that the GSL agree to give time for diplomacy to work. He emphasized that we all want an end to LTTE terror, but not in a way that kills thousands of civilians and gives the LTTE a new cause on which to re-mobilize opinion behind it. Rajapaksa agreed and said he would talk to the President.

¶14. (SBU) Tamil sources from within the "safe zone" reported 37 dead and 112 injured April 12 and until 7 am April 13 due to artillery fire.

BLAKE